

WHY COLLECT?

JOHN WHIPPLE POTTER JENKS was “positively ashamed” that Brown University, his alma mater, had no museum. In the 1860s it seemed that a university needed one. Alexis Caswell, Brown’s president, explained why: “Without knowing something of the forms and laws of animal life which everywhere surround us . . . we seem to be walking blindfold in the midst of nature’s richest treasures.” A collection of natural history would help students develop “the powers of observation, comparison and generalization.” Students too were concerned. Brown was falling behind other universities. One undergraduate wrote that “a cabinet of comparative anatomy is essential to any college. . . . Every plant and animal is an expressed thought of God, and cannot be presented through the medium of a professor. Brown has one ghastly skeleton and two or three small charts, and a few promiscuous bones!”¹

Jenks volunteered to create a museum at Brown. In 1871 he retired from his job as headmaster of the Pierce Academy in Middleboro, Massachusetts, and moved his personal collection of taxidermied birds and mammals to Providence. He purchased collections and persuaded collectors to donate. He arranged for trades with the Smithsonian. Within a few months of returning to Brown he had filled several cases with minerals, fossils, shells, and animals. “The display,” he wrote, “gave satisfaction to all.”²

The founding of the Jenks Museum at Brown offers a snapshot of some of the reasons that museums build collections. Religion, love of nature, a feeling that artifacts are more true than words, their value in teaching, a



Brown University's Rhode Island Hall, home of the Jenks Museum, 1870s.

touch of envy; all of these were present in the formation of Brown's museum. Artifacts—real things—seemed essential for the university's work.

Museums Need Objects

These ideas about the importance of artifacts reflected widespread beliefs with a long history. Renaissance royalty and merchants collected and displayed rare and valuable objects to showcase their wealth, culture, and distinction. In the age of empire, nations built museum collections to flaunt their political and economic power. Artifacts were essential to science, technology, and agriculture, analyzed and explored in laboratories and workshops. And, of course, they were useful for teaching of all sorts. Objects properly displayed could reveal the hierarchies of nature and culture.

Objects in museums also served social purposes. The formation of museums with permanent collections, places where experts vouched for

the authenticity of art and artifact, and arranged it to tell useful stories, reinforced the authority of political, economic, cultural, and scholarly elites. Museum displays made—and still make—powerful arguments for the stability of culture.

Collections are a good place to start our exploration of museums because museums are, at a fundamental level, about objects. There is endless discussion about whether objects are essential to the work of the museum. Museum historian Steven Conn raises the question in the title of his book *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*³ I think they do. Collections—objects selected to provide evidence and to tell stories—are what make museums so interesting. They are what distinguishes museums from other educational institutions. Conn argues that the modern museum was created when objects were shown not for their own sake but as part of an object-based epistemology that made sense of them, put them in a larger story, and gave them an audience.⁴ “Collections,” argued a 1984 American Association of Museums report, “are the essence of the contribution museums make to society.”⁵

Collections don’t just happen. Acquisition and preservation are hard work. An object is in a museum because someone decided to collect it. Consider the 50,000 objects in the Jenks Museum. Jenks enjoyed telling the story of how they got there—about his expedition to Florida to explore and collect new specimens, the missionary who sent crates of ethnographic treasures from Burma, the local folks who would drop off strange things they thought should be preserved. Every curator has war stories like these: the thrill of the chase, the rivals outwitted, the bargains no one else appreciated.

But those personal stories are important only because of the larger story: museum collecting is disciplined collecting, for a larger purpose. It’s different from personal collecting, different from hoarding. To build a museum collection one fits together the pieces of a complicated, multidimensional jigsaw puzzle, working with other curators, past, present, and future, over decades or centuries. It is a challenging intellectual exercise. The curator’s job, as collector, is to determine what’s worth saving and convince the museum it’s worth saving. Then to move the object, and its story, into the museum, so that it can be put to use.

I say here, “the curator’s job,” but that’s shorthand. Curators work with many others, both inside the museum and out: registrars, collections managers, educators, outside experts, dealers and donors, and, of course, the public. They work within cultural notions of what seems appropriate to collect, and practical, ethical, and legal constraints of what can be collected.

The objects Jenks collected represented more than just adventures, the museum more than a storehouse for exotica. Jenks believed that his taxidermied animals and African spears and ancient coins were indispensable teaching tools. They served a higher purpose as well. The objects he collected reflected his belief in natural theology: the glories of nature reflected the glory of God. A visit to the museum was, Jenks believed, an opportunity for a religious experience.

That bigger picture is different for different museums. It might be, as it was for Jenks, a religious story. It might be political, social, or cultural. It might be the story of a town or a nation, an art movement, or the natural world. Or it might be a grand vision like the wonderfully ambitious mission that Brooklyn Museum director Franklin Hooper announced in 1895: “all known human history, the infinite capacity of man to act, to think and to love, and the many departments of science and of art which he has developed. Through its collections in the arts and sciences, and through its libraries, it should be possible to read the history of the world.”⁶

Not every museum aims this high, but all museum collecting has this in common: to use the artifact to tell a bigger story. The way museums do that is to move things out of their natural habitat and put them in a place where both the things themselves and information about them can be preserved and used in a new way. Museums give artifacts a new life, a new meaning. The new life is as part of a collection that tells that larger story.

I tell the collecting story in three stages. In this chapter and the next: What makes something museum-worthy? Then, in Chapters 3 and 4: How do museums build their collections, through gifts, purchases, and field collecting? And finally, in Chapter 5, I look more closely at what curators need to know to be good collectors.

What to Collect

Jenks collected thousands of objects each year the museum was open. He was acquisitive, even rapacious. His annual reports to the university's president tell some of those stories. How could he resist the offer of a dead giraffe from the Central Park Zoo? His collecting reflected his energy and his enthusiasm for the museum's mission. Not only could Jenks not control his own collecting, much came in unsolicited. What to do with the "valuable gifts, most of which came unexpectedly by mail or express"?⁷ The basement of the museum building was full of unopened crates.

The Jenks Museum collected too much. In part, the problem was that Jenks loved to collect. In part, it was that the intellectual justification of his work, natural theology, meant that almost everything was useful. Jenks's always-uncertain funding at Brown compounded the problem: his desire to prove that the museum would be useful to "every department of instruction" meant that any new gift might bring the museum a new ally. The Jenks Museum lacked a clear collecting agenda.

It's hard for a curator to say no, to let an object go to another museum, to a private collector, or into the trash. It's a challenging problem for museum directors who manage curators. How can someone who is not an expert evaluate the collecting of a specialist? What do you say to the scientist who is the world's authority on fleas and wants to collect more? (They take up so little room.) How to judge the instincts of a decorative arts curator intent on building the museum's chair collection? When is a collection good enough? How do you balance the resources for collecting with those for taking care of and making use of the collections?

Frederic Lucas, describing his time as director of the Brooklyn Museum in the early twentieth century, acknowledged these difficulties: "Museums, so far as their collections are concerned, are seldom, or never, formed according to a definite plan. Their growth is sometimes influenced by circumstances, a bequest, the gift of a collection, or of money for the purchase of a collection. More often it reflects the interest of some . . . able or energetic curators of great persuasive powers, wealthy friends of the museum, or even collectors. . . . The result is that museums are more or less unbalanced, overdeveloped in some directions, atrophied in others."⁸

The Smithsonian Institution has worried about this problem since its founding. The first secretary, Joseph Henry, didn't want to collect at all, worried about the need for continued government support for collections. When the institution did start building collections, it was inundated with them, in part because of a policy that let curators decide what they needed and let them collect until they ran out of storage space and demanded more. Curators were professionals; they knew what they needed for their work. A 1977 report summed up the policy: "Each curator had pretty much first and final say regarding the collection process." For that report, the Smithsonian hired mathematicians to calculate the expected size of the collections fifty years in the future, were that policy to continue. Their predictions were scary. Depending on the assumptions—linear or compound growth—there would be either 161,000,000 objects in the collection by 2015, or 255,000,000.⁹ The actual number as of 2016 is 156,000,000.¹⁰

Over-collecting is still a common problem. Collecting is exciting, fulfilling work. Some museums connect pay and promotion to collecting prowess. Museums are judged by their collections; museums compete with each other for collections, and curators like to win. Collecting is an easy-to-measure way of comparing museums. Museum director Steven Miller made the connection directly: "The better the collections the more highly respected the museum, and new acquisitions are the spiritual manna that prove an institution's worth."¹¹

But curators, and museums, shouldn't be judged by the quantity of their collecting. Indeed, the first thing a curator needs to learn is how to say no. Collecting more things means less time to understand each object, less time to care for it and put it to use, less time to do the other work on the curator's agenda. It often means that the work of other departments of the museum is short-changed. Collections are expensive to maintain. John Cotton Dana, the plainspoken director of the Newark Museum, wrote in 1917, "It is better to spend money in making good use of one thing than in acquiring another thing. The worth of a museum object is in its use."¹² Dana came to museums from a long career in libraries, where he had fought for public education and access. He was a voice for making museums useful, writing a series of books with titles like *A Plan for a New Museum, the Kind of Museum it will Profit a City to Maintain*. Not everyone

agreed with his opinions, and he knew it, writing that he was opposed to “most of the accepted museum conventions.”¹³

A museum needs a good reason to accept an offered gift, and many turn down much more than they accept. As far back as 1884, a curator noted that “the paradox has been propounded that it is the chief duty of the managing committee to keep things out of their museum.”¹⁴ Nearly a hundred years later, in a 1976 survey, the aeronautics department of the National Air and Space Museum proudly reported that it had accepted only three of the nineteen aircraft it was offered. The anthropology department of the National Museum of Natural History reported in the same year that curators turned down about three-quarters of what they were offered, and that its collections advisory committee turned down about 15 percent of what the curators had approved.¹⁵ Museum curators deflect inappropriate donations, often most of what’s offered, politely suggesting other, more appropriate museums.

How much is enough? An old joke among curators of natural history museums had it that a series—a group of specimens useful for scientific work—was “one more specimen than any one has.”¹⁶ Funny, but true. Systematic biology, after all, depends on large collections. The largest single collection in a museum—the over 7.5 million gall wasps Alfred Kinsey collected for the American Museum of Natural History—offers both an example and a warning. Large series show the variation within species and population changes over time and place. But curators can get carried away. Kinsey, who went on to fame as a sex researcher, wanted to outdo his advisor, who had collected a million ants for Harvard, and he did, earning the nickname “Get a million Kinsey.” In the high school biology textbook he authored he urged students to collect: “If your collection is larger, even a shade larger, than any other like it in the world, that greatly increases your happiness. It shows how complete a work you can accomplish, in what good order you can arrange the specimens, with what surpassing wisdom you can exhibit them, and with what authority you can speak on your subject.”¹⁷ Not good advice for a museum curator.

Objects are important to museums, but they need to be the right objects, collected thoughtfully, documented thoroughly—and not too many. The institution is committing to support them, now and for the future.

Museum-Worthy

Some types of objects seem museum-worthy, and some don't. The answer to the question of what's worth collecting, what's worthy of preservation, reflects the complex relationship between value and meaning.

Consider "manufactured collectables," the things made solely to be collected, like Beanie Babies, or Franklin Mint plates. These can bring great pleasure to their owners, but with very few exceptions they find no place in a museum. Museums do collect other kinds of collectables, but often with a different purpose than they have for collectors. Consider baseball cards. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has some 30,000 of them. While collectors would likely have the cards as a way to connect with their baseball heroes or to reminisce about their youth, at the Met the cards are examples of commercial printing, so-called low culture. The National Baseball Hall of Fame has even more baseball cards, to document the game and its culture. The National Museum of American History's card collection serves to document the role of the sport in American culture.

Art museums are perpetually the site of a battle over what art is and what belongs in a museum. Collecting American furniture only became acceptable in the early twentieth century. Many museums resisted collecting photography and contemporary art for the first half of the twentieth century. They continued to resist innovations in art or anything that challenged their usual categories. Women artists and artists of color are still fighting for their place.

Photography offers a good example. Alfred Stieglitz liked to tell the story of his attempt, about 1900, to persuade the Metropolitan Museum of Art to include photography. General Cesnola, the first director, was shocked at the idea. "Cesnola gasped. He said, 'Why, Mr. Stieglitz, you won't insist that a photograph can possibly be a work of art?'" Stieglitz replied that, yes, "there were certain photographs that I felt were art." Cesnola replied "You are a fanatic."¹⁸

Some twenty years later, Stieglitz tried again. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts had accepted some of his photographs, to hang with Goya and Dürer prints—accepted them, but wouldn't pay for them. The Met, wanting to keep up with the Boston museum, decided that it wanted Stieglitz photographs, too—but, like Boston, not enough to pay for them. Stieglitz told

the curator that “as the museum bought paintings and sculpture and etchings and other things, I didn’t see why, if photographs were deserving they should not be bought with museum funds.”¹⁹ But he finally gave in, and found donors who would donate a collection of photographs. Documentary photography took even longer to find a home in museums. It was still controversial in some museums into the 1970s.

Contemporary art has been a challenge for museums throughout the twentieth century. The Met was the scene of protests by artists, critics, and dealers over its refusal to collect contemporary American art in the 1930s. Stuart Davis, an abstract painter, wrote in 1940 that the Met “suppresses modern and abstract art in its policies as effectively as would a totalitarian regime.” One trustee advised that the museum should accept a few pieces, to quiet the controversy: “It doesn’t matter particularly if we acquire a certain number of mediocre or uninteresting, or more or less radical pictures so long as their purchase can be justified on political grounds. They can hang on our walls for a while and then receive a decent burial in the cellar.”²⁰

Even museums devoted to contemporary art have found themselves constantly trying to decide whether to accept each new innovation. Each new phase of contemporary art—video, performance art, activist art, institutional critique, and more—has had to fight its way in. Hans Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al. Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, an early work of socially engaged art, provoked a strong reaction from the director of the Guggenheim, who declared it “an alien substance that had entered the art museum organism,” and cancelled Haacke’s show.²¹ The work is now in the collection of the Whitney.

History museums have had their fights, too. In the 1980s, social history expanded what seems collectable, but collecting everyday life remains a challenge: The elegant furniture of a rich family’s living room seems more worthy of the permanent collection than the cheap, worn-out furniture of the servants’ quarters. Mass-produced artifacts seem less collectable than handmade ones. Items from famous figures are easier to make the case for than those from everyman and everywoman. Some aspects of life, especially traditional women’s work like childcare and cleaning, don’t create artifacts that seem collectable. Objects reflecting changing ideas about race and religion can seem too controversial. Present attitudes

always shape history museum collections; we collect what seems important to us today, to help us make sense of—and use—the past.

Anthropology museums have always collected broadly, both objects and documentation, but their focus has changed over time. They originally tried to collect the “pure” culture of an imagined primitive past, based on theories of social evolution. Ethnographic collecting went out of favor at the end of the twentieth century, and archaeological collecting became more difficult, restricted both by new ethical guidelines and by political realities. Some anthropology museums have begun to focus their collecting on the complexities and cross-connecting cultures of the contemporary world. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History now has a “curator of globalization.” Chicago’s Field Museum has begun to build contemporary urban collections.

Natural history museums today try to document the whole world. Their precursors, the cabinets of curiosities, wanted exotics, curiosities, exceptions; the modern natural history museum wants the representative, the vast range of the ordinary. They have also expanded their collecting in a different way: they now collect not just skin and skeleton but also tissue from which DNA can be easily extracted, and information on behavior and environment, to go with the physical specimen.

Every museum has a mission statement, and many have collecting mission statements, but those are rarely specific enough to address particular objects. They often use fuzzy language. Some defer to the museum mission more generally, asking that collections be consistent with the purposes of the museum. Or they put it as a negative. The U.S. Army museum system wants to “prevent nonmission objects from being acquired.”²²

Some simply suggest excellence, by various measures. The classic statement of this is Alfred Barr’s definition of the work of the museum as “the conscientious, continuous, resolute distinction of quality from mediocrity.”²³ (Barr was the founding director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, in 1929, and eager to claim quality for contemporary art.) Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art wants “the very best art being made today.” The J. Paul Getty Museum collects “works of art of outstanding quality and historical importance.”²⁴

Some collecting visions suggest the larger value of collections. They echo George Brown Goode’s 1895 definition of a museum as a place for

objects “which best illustrate the phenomena of nature and the works of man.”²⁵ “Best illustrate” is a wonderful phrase, and particularly appropriate to Goode’s work as the head of the Smithsonian’s United States National Museum. It suggests both judgment in collecting and that collections are there to be used, to be learned from, and to be judged by how well they serve that mission. They’re chosen not for intrinsic value but for teaching and research value. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts “seeks to acquire art of the past and present which is visually significant and educationally meaningful.” The words “significant” and “meaningful,” like Goode’s phrase, imply a purpose beyond the object itself. The Chicago History Museum demands even more, asking that every new acquisition “present opportunities to reveal or expand on a compelling and significant story or theme of Chicago.”²⁶

Whether the standard is quality, significance, story, or usefulness, the key thing is to have a standard. It’s tempting to acquire in an ad hoc way, making the case for each object as it comes in. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History website insists that every one of its more than three million artifacts is a “true national treasure.”²⁷ It’s easy to see why the museum might make that claim, but by defining everything as a national treasure it offers no guidance for future acquisitions. It defines “treasure” through the act of collecting, rather than forcing the museum to collect things that meet some definition of “treasure.”

Shaping collections is difficult, requiring museums to consider fundamental questions about use and audience. Are the acquisitions to be used for exhibition, research, or education? Do they appeal to the visitors that attend the museum, or to those that the museum would like to have attend, or to some aspect of the community the museum is supposed to serve? Is the museum collecting for contemporary audiences or future audiences? More generally, how might the acquisitive drive of curators be channeled into collections of long-term value not just to their own interests and research but to the needs of the museum and, beyond that, to the benefit of researchers and the general public?

Museum-worthiness sets the stage for a curator’s collecting work. What makes a particular object worth collecting? That’s the topic of the next chapter.